

CHAPTER 1: ROMAN SOCIETY

SLAVES, FREEDMEN, AND PLEBEIANS

The Romans, like other ancient civilizations, divided their people into distinct social groups. At the bottom step of the social scale were slaves, who had no rights or privileges whatsoever. But slaves in ancient Rome could, and often did, become legally free. When slaves were granted their freedom, they became known as *libertini*, or freedmen and freedwomen. *Libertini* were eligible for Roman citizenship. Once they became citizens of Rome, they joined the ranks of the lowest and largest class of citizens, the plebeian class. Although the social stigma of having once been a slave remained for freed people, as new citizens they mingled freely with free-born citizens.

THE UPPER CLASSES

Above the plebeian class were those citizens who sprang from distinguished family backgrounds and who usually possessed great wealth. In the earliest period of Roman history there was one upper class, whose membership was determined solely by family background. Gradually a second upper class emerged. The rules for membership in each of the upper classes changed as Rome itself grew in size and importance. In order to understand how and why the upper classes developed, it is helpful to know some background information about Rome's three phases of government: monarchy, republic, and empire.

FROM MONARCHY TO REPUBLIC TO EMPIRE

At first, monarchs or kings ruled Rome. During the Monarchy, some leaders were outstanding and some clearly were not. The traditional dates for the Monarchy are 753–509 BCE. After the seventh and last king, a tyrant, was overthrown, the Romans, fearful of one-man rule, established a republic. The traditional dates for the Republic are 509–27 BCE. Roman citizens now voted for their leaders in elections.

The highest elected official was called a *consul*, and two men, who shared power equally, were elected to this office every year. Citizens who had held public offices were eligible to become senators. The role of the Senate was to give advice to political officials. Although this system of government was effective for many centuries, eventually the Roman Republic began to falter and break apart. Power once again passed to a single man, but this time he was called an emperor instead of a king. The last period of Roman history is therefore known as the Roman Empire. Most of the laws that determined which social class people belonged to were established during the Roman Republic. The traditional dates for the Empire are 27 BCE–476 CE.



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Fig. 1.
This frieze from the *Ara Pacis*, created in the very early years of the Empire, shows Romans dressed formally in their togas.

PATRICIANS

In the early years of the Roman Republic, class was mainly determined by family background. Just as some Americans today are proud to have in their family tree a Native American, or a Pilgrim who traveled on the Mayflower or a signer of the Declaration of Independence, so Romans boasted about their descent from families whose names and deeds appeared in the earliest histories of Rome. Families who could trace their heritage back to the beginning of Rome became members of the highest class. They were called patricians.

PATRICIANS VS. PLEBEIANS

There were, naturally, far fewer patricians than other members of Roman society. By banding together, however, and supporting their own causes, patricians became so powerful that they soon controlled the rest of the Roman citizens, the plebeians. Although most of the patricians were wealthy, others lost their fortunes as time passed. A few of the plebeians, in the meantime, managed to accumulate great wealth during the growth and development of the Republic. Since money had helped to make the patricians powerful, the newly wealthy plebeians believed that they now deserved a more important and influential role in the emerging Republic.

After a long and bitter struggle against the patricians, plebeians eventually gained the legal right to seek political office. Descent from an ancient and illustrious family, though still important, gradually became less important than wealth in determining a person's social class. Rome was now divided by class and by wealth. There were two social classes, patricians and plebeians, some of whom were rich and some of whom were poor. There was no middle class.

NOBLES AND COMMONERS

By the middle of the republican period, the terms "patrician" and "patrician class" had disappeared. Wealthy citizens, who called themselves "the good men" or "the best men," divided themselves into two groups, politicians and businessmen. Those who chose politics as their career and held a public office became senators, and their families became members of the senatorial class of citizens. On the other hand, those families whose members engaged primarily in business made up the equestrian class. Equestrians, however, were not barred from seeking public office. Indeed, individual members of the equestrian class often did hold elected governmental positions. Once a family member from either class attained the highest public office, that of *consul*, then his family, whether senatorial or equestrian, became noble. It is important to remember that members of both the senatorial and the equestrian class were generally wealthy.

Just as wealthy citizens had different labels, so did the lower class of citizens. During the Republic and onwards, the plebeian class was often referred to as simply "the people" or sometimes "the commoners."

Although the names of social groups were not always consistent, each person's class and social status were absolutely clear to other Romans. And everyone was expected to act in accordance with his or her place in society. Three clues that immediately indicated a person's social class and standing were: clothing, name, and the name of one's patron.

CLOTHING

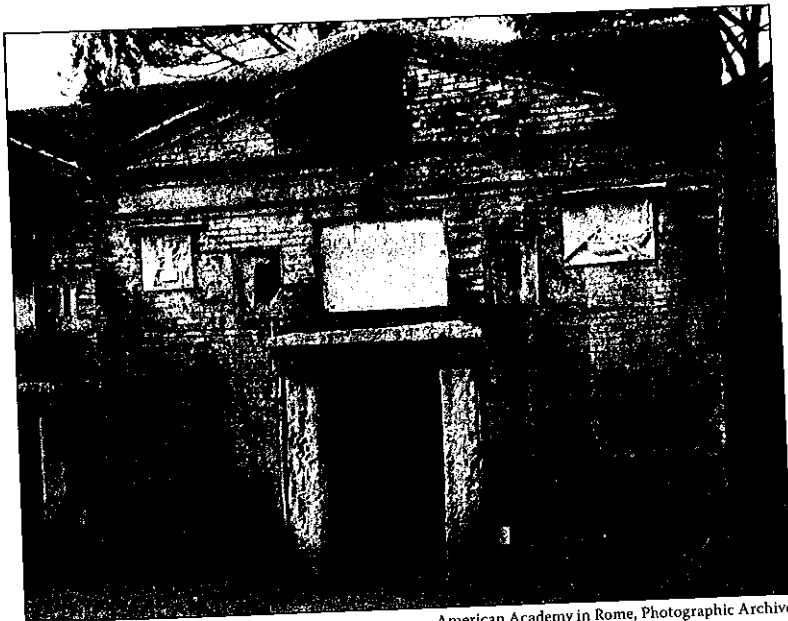
The first and most obvious clue was clothing. Only citizens were permitted to wear a toga over their tunic. Of course the quality and expense of the toga provided a further indication of the wearer's status. Furthermore, senators and equestrians wore distinctive purple stripes on their togas and tunics, broad



Fig. 2.
Notice the difference between the nobles wearing togas and the attendant wearing a tunic and cloak.

family or clan. The third name, Caesar, was called the *cognomen*. This name was most commonly used to indicate the branch of the family to which the person belonged.

There was a limited number of male *praenomina*, and only 15 routinely appear: Aulus, Caius, Cnaeus (also spelled Gnaeus), Decimus, Kaeso, Lucius, Manius, Marcus, Publius, Quintus, Servius, Sextus, Spurius, Tiberius, and Titus. These names were usually abbreviated: A., C., Cn., D., K., L., M', M., P., Q., Ser., Sex., S., Ti., and T. Women rarely had *praenomina*. Well-established families customarily limited their choice of *praenomina* to a few names and bestowed them in a set order. The Julian family, for example, named their sons Caius, Lucius, and Sextus, in that order. It was usually clear from his name who was the first-born son and heir.



American Academy in Rome, Photographic Archive

Fig. 3.
This tomb was built by Ti. Claudius Eutychus for his wife, Claudia Memonides.

stripes for senators and narrow ones for equestrians. They were also allowed to wear special rings and accessories. The way they dressed instantly set toga-clad senators, equestrians, and plebeians apart from the tunic-clad masses of slaves and from foreigners. A poor citizen probably owned only one toga, but he wore it whenever he needed to assert his status as a Roman citizen. Women's clothing, on the other hand, did not indicate their rank as clearly as men's clothing did.

NAMES

The second clue to a person's class was his or her name. Names revealed much information about status. It was common, but by no means the rule, for upper-class males to have a three-part name. Julius Caesar's full name, for example, was Caius Julius Caesar. The first name in this series, Caius (also spelled Gaius), was called the *praenomen* and was equivalent to a first name, such as Michael, or David, or Paul. The second name, Julius, was called the *nomen*, and it identified the extended

Everyone had at least a *nomen*, and frequently that was all a woman or a slave had. The majority of male free-born Roman citizens, however, had only two names, a *praenomen* and a *nomen*. There were only a few patrician family *nomina*, and most ended in -ius, such as Julius, Aemilius, Flavius, and Cornelius.

PATRONS AND CLIENTS

Discovering the social standing of a citizen's patron provided a third valuable clue to establishing that person's place in society. Most Roman citizens served as a client or supporter of a patron. The more prominent the patron, the more highly regarded was his client. Freedmen of distinguished patrons frequently rose to very high stations.

Patrons selected their clients carefully, and some collected more than a hundred supporters on whom they depended for loyalty and service. Typically, clients were expected to congregate in the morning at the house of their wealthier patron to greet him as soon as he went outdoors to begin his day. If the patron wished, his clients accompanied him on any political or legal business where an impressive and large crowd of supporters might prove useful or beneficial. Clients were the patron's "people." In exchange for this show of support from his clientele, a patron was expected to assist his clients in time of need and to provide them with food, money, or legal assistance.

The system of patronage in Rome can be described as a great pyramid. At the top were the wealthiest citizens who had so much money that they did not need a patron of their own. Below them were their clients who, in turn, could also be patrons to other clients farther down the social scale. And so on, until the base of the pyramid encompassed nearly all the citizens of Rome. A slave who was freed almost always became a client of his former master. The citizens who had no patron were the truly destitute and the homeless who could not qualify to become clients.

The relationship between patron and client was a central feature of Roman social and political life. Violating the mutual trust between a patron and his client was one of the most serious moral offenses one could commit. These relationships could be initiated at any time, were often inherited, and were rarely canceled.

Obviously there were many other ways a Roman could let others know who he was, how wealthy he was, and where he belonged in Roman society. But these three factors or signals-- clothing, name, and a citizen's client/patron relationship-- were the easiest to observe in a society that not only wanted, but needed to know and to communicate the place each person held in the system.

Chapter 1 Exercises: *Roman Society*

FILL IN THE BLANKS

Use the following word bank to fill in the blanks:

nobles	plebeians	equestrians	patrons	slaves
emperors	senators	patricians	kings	freedmen/freedwomen

1. The non-citizens of Rome who enjoyed no rights or privileges were called _____.
2. Slaves who were granted their freedom were known as _____.
3. Those families who could trace their ancestry back to the earliest days of Rome were called _____.
4. The members of the lowest class of Roman citizens were _____.
5. An upper-class citizen who held a public office was entitled to join a political advisory group made up of _____.
6. Upper-class citizens who engaged in business were called _____.
7. A *consul* and his family members were known as _____.
8. The earliest rulers of Rome were seven _____.
9. During the last phase of Rome's history, Rome was ruled by _____.
10. Clients were expected to show loyal support to their _____.

ABBREVIATIONS AND WORD SEARCH

Write the abbreviation for the *praenomina* listed below. Then find each name in the word search puzzle.

Aulus	_____
Caius	_____
Cnaius	_____
Decimus	_____
Kaeso	_____
Lucius	_____
Manius	_____
Marcus	_____

Publius	_____
Quintus	_____
Servius	_____
Sextus	_____
Spurius	_____
Tiberius	_____
Titus	_____

L P A T I U M A N I U S L
 A U L U S P A R L K A T U
 R B I S P U R I U S D U S
 S L G N A I C U C R E S E
 T I B E R I U S I A C K R
 I U S P Q R S Q U N I A V
 T S Q U I N T U S U M E I
 U C A I U S S E X T U S U
 S E R V I C N A I U S O S

WORD STUDY

Match each of the following words in Column A with a word associated with it by derivation in Column B.

- | Column A | Column B |
|----------------------------|---------------|
| 1. _____ Monarchy | a) liberty |
| 2. _____ Republic | b) majority |
| 3. _____ Patron, patrician | c) consult |
| 4. _____ Nomen | d) plebiscite |
| 5. _____ Liberti | e) minus |
| 6. _____ <i>Consul</i> | f) monocle |
| 7. _____ Senator | g) paternal |
| 8. _____ Major | h) senile |
| 9. _____ Minor | i) tertiary |
| 10. _____ Plebeian | j) publish |
| 11. _____ Secunda | k) nominate |
| 12. _____ Tertia | l) secondary |